Iran

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam, and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." The Government restricts freedom of religion.

There was no substantive change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. Members of the country's religious minorities--including Sunni and Sufi Muslims, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians--reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. Government actions created a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Jews, and evangelical Christians.

The U.S. Government makes clear its objections to the Government's treatment of religious minorities through public statements, support for relevant U.N. and nongovernmental organization (NGO) efforts, as well as diplomatic initiatives among all states concerned about religious freedom in the country. Since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

In December 2003, the U.N. General Assembly passed Resolution 58/195 on the human rights situation in the country that expressed serious concern about the continued discrimination against religious minorities by the Government. In the fall of 2004, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the human rights situation in Iran.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately631,660 square miles, and its population is an estimated 69 million. The population is approximately 97 percent Muslim, of which an estimated 89 percent are Shi'a and 8 percent are Sunni, mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest. Sufi Brotherhoods are popular, but there are no reliable figures available regarding the size of the Sufi population.

According to the country's most recent official national census, taken in 1996, there were an estimated 59.8 million Muslims, 30,000 Zoroastrians, 79,000 Christians, and 13,000 Jews, with 28,000 "others" and 47,000 "not stated."

Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Mandaeans, and Zoroastrians constitute less than 1 percent of the population combined. The largest non-Muslim minority is the Baha'i community, which has an estimated 300,000 to 350,000 adherents throughout the country. Credible estimates on the size of the Jewish community vary from 20,000 to 30,000. This figure represents a substantial reduction from the estimated 75,000 to 80,000 Jews who resided in the country prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution. According to U.N. figures, there are approximately 300,000 Christians, the majority of whom are ethnic Armenians. Unofficial estimates indicate an Assyrian Christian population of approximately 10,000. There also are Protestant denominations, including evangelical churches. The U.N. Special Representative reported that Christians are emigrating at an estimated rate of 15,000 to 20,000 per year. The Mandaeans, a community whose religion draws on pre-Christian gnostic beliefs, number approximately 5,000 to 10,000 persons, with members residing primarily in Khuzestan in the southwest.

The Government estimates the Zoroastrian community at approximately 30,000 to 35,000 adherents; however, Zoroastrian groups cite an estimated 60,000 adherents. Zoroastrians mainly are ethnic Persians concentrated in the cities of Tehran, Kerman, and Yazd. Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the pre-Islamic Sassanid Empire and thus played a central role in the country's history.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Government restricts freedom of religion. The Constitution declares the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the doctrine

followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism." All laws and regulations must be consistent with the official interpretation of the Shari'a (Islamic law). The Constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion; however, members of these recognized minority religious groups have reported imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs. Adherents of religions not recognized by the Constitution do not enjoy freedom to practice their beliefs. This restriction seriously affects adherents of the Baha'i Faith, which the Government regards as a heretical Islamic group with a political orientation that is antagonistic to the country's Islamic revolution. However, Baha'is view themselves not as Muslims, but as an independent religion with origins in the Shi'a Islamic tradition. Government officials have stated that, as individuals, all Baha'is are entitled to their beliefs and are protected under the articles of the Constitution as citizens; however, the Government has continued to prohibit Baha'is from teaching and practicing their faith.

The tricameral government structure is ruled over by a supreme religious jurisconsult, or "Supreme Leader." This Supreme Leader, chosen by a group of 83 Islamic scholars, oversees the State's decision-making process. All acts of the Majlis (legislative body or parliament) must be reviewed for conformity with Islamic law and the Constitution by the Council of Guardians, which is composed of six clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader, as well as six Muslim jurists (legal scholars) nominated by the Head of the Judiciary and approved by the Majlis.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity closely. Adherents of recognized religious minorities are not required to register individually with the Government; however, their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, are monitored closely. Registration of Baha'is is a police function. The Government has pressured evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations, but evangelicals have resisted this demand. Non-Muslim owners of grocery shops are required to indicate their religious affiliation on the fronts of their shops.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

By law and practice, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions; however, 5 of a total 270 seats in the Majlis are reserved for religious minorities. Three of these seats are reserved for members of the Christian faith, two seats for the country's Armenian Christians, and one for Assyrians and Chaldeans. There is also one seat for a member of the Jewish faith, and one for a member of the Zoroastrian faith. While members of the Sunni Muslim minority do not have reserved seats in the Majlis, they are allowed to serve in the body. Members of religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, are allowed to vote. All of Iran's minority religions, including Sunni Muslims, are barred from being elected President.

All religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing. The Government does not protect the right of citizens to change or renounce their religious faith. Apostasy, specifically conversion from Islam, may be punishable by death; however, there were no reported cases of the death penalty being applied for apostasy during the reporting period.
Members of religious minorities, excluding Sunni Muslims, are prevented from serving in the judiciary and security services and from becoming public school principals. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their adherence to and knowledge of Islam. Government workers who do not observe Islam's principles and rules are subject to penalties. The Constitution states that the country's army must be Islamic and must recruit individuals who are committed to the objectives of the Islamic revolution; however, in practice no religious minorities are exempt from military service.

University applicants are required to pass an examination in Islamic theology, which limits the access of most religious minorities to higher education, although all public school students, including non-Muslims, must study Islam. The Government generally allows recognized religious minorities to conduct religious education for their adherents. This includes separate and privately funded Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian schools; however, Baha'i schools are not allowed. The Ministry of Education, which imposes certain curriculum requirements, supervises these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools is not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities may provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts require approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposes significant translation expenses on minority communities.

The legal system discriminates against religious minorities, who receive lower awards than Muslims in injury and death lawsuits and incur heavier punishments. In January 2005, the Expediency Council approved appending a Note to Article 297 of the 1991 Islamic Punishments Act, authorizing collection of equal "blood money" (diyeh) for the death of Muslims and non-Muslims. All women and Baha'i men were excluded from the equalization provisions of the bill. According to law, Baha'i blood is considered "Mobah," meaning it can be spilled with impunity.

Sunni Muslims are the largest religious minority in the country, claiming a membership of approximately five and a half million (8 percent of the population), consisting mostly of Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchs, and Kurds living in the southwest, southeast, and northwest. The Constitution provides Sunni Muslims a large degree of religious freedom, although it forbids a Sunni Muslim from becoming President. Sunnis claim that the Government discriminates against them; however, it is difficult to distinguish whether the cause for discrimination is religious or ethnic since most Sunnis are also members of ethnic minorities. Sunnis cite the lack of a Sunni mosque in Tehran, despite the presence of over 1 million adherents there, as a prominent example of this discrimination. Sunnis also have cited the lack of Sunni representation in appointed offices in provinces where they form a

majority, such as Kurdistan province, as well as their reported inability to obtain senior governmental positions. In addition, Sunnis have charged that the state broadcasting company, Voice and Vision, airs programming insulting to them.

In April 2004, Sunni Majlis representatives sent a letter to Supreme Leader Khamene'i decrying the lack of Sunni presence in the executive and judiciary branches of government, especially in higher-ranking positions in embassies, universities, and other institutions. They called on Khamene'i to issue a decree halting anti-Sunni propaganda in the mass media, books, and publications; the measure would include the state-run media. The Sunni representatives also requested adherence to the constitutional articles ensuring equal treatment of all ethnic groups.

The Baha'i Faith originated in the country during the 1840s as a reformist movement within Shi'a Islam. The Government considers Baha'is to be apostates because of their claim to a valid religious revelation subsequent to that of Muhammed, despite the fact that Baha'is do not consider themselves to be Muslim. Additionally, the Baha'i Faith is defined by the Government as a political "sect," linked to the Pahlavi regime and hence counterrevolutionary. A 2001 Ministry of Justice report stated in part that Baha'is would be permitted to enroll in schools only if they did not identify themselves as Baha'is, and that Baha'is preferably should be enrolled in schools with a strong and imposing religious ideology. The report also stated that Baha'is must be excluded or expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once their identity becomes known.

Baha'is may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. The fact that the Baha'i world headquarters (established by the founder of the Baha'i Faith in the 19th century, in what was then Ottoman-controlled Palestine) is situated in what is now the state of Israel exposes Baha'is to government charges of "espionage on behalf of Zionism." These charges were more acute when Baha'is were caught communicating with or sending monetary contributions to the Baha'i headquarters.

Baha'is were banned from government employment. In addition, Baha'is were regularly denied compensation for injury or criminal victimization.

The Government allows recognized religious minorities to establish community centers and certain self-financed cultural, social, athletic, or charitable associations. However, the Government prohibits the Baha'i community from official assembly and from maintaining administrative institutions by actively closing such Baha'i institutions. Since the Baha'i Faith has no clergy, the denial of the right to form such institutions and elect officers threatens its existence in the country.

Broad restrictions on Baha'is undermine their ability to function as a community. Baha'is repeatedly have been offered relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith.

Baha'i cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centers, and other assets were seized shortly after the 1979 Revolution. No properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. Baha'is were not allowed to bury and honor their dead in keeping with their religious tradition. Baha'i graveyards in Yazd and other cities have been desecrated, and the Government did not seek to identify or punish the perpetrators. Public and private universities continue to deny admittance to Baha'i students. In July 2004, for the first time, Baha'i applicants were permitted to take part in the nationwide exam for entrance into state-run universities. However, for those students who passed the exam, "Islam" was pre-printed as a prospective student's religious affiliation on the form authorizing their matriculation. This action precluded Baha'i enrollment in the country's state-run universities since a tenet of Baha'ism is to not deny one's faith.

In principle, but with some exceptions, there is little restriction of or interference with Jewish religious practice; however, education of Jewish children has become more difficult in recent years. The Government reportedly allows Hebrew instruction, recognizing that it is necessary for Jewish religious practice. However, it strongly discourages the distribution of Hebrew texts, in practice making it difficult to teach the language. Moreover, the Government has required that in conformity with the schedule of other schools, several Jewish schools must remain open on Saturdays, which violates Jewish law.

Jewish citizens are permitted to obtain passports and to travel outside the country, but they often are denied the multiple-exit permits normally issued to other citizens. With the exception of certain business travelers, the authorities require Jews to obtain clearance and pay additional fees before each trip abroad. The Government appears concerned about the emigration of Jewish citizens and permission generally is not granted for all members of a Jewish family to travel outside the country at the same time.
According to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) background paper on the country, the Mandaeans are regarded as Christians and are included among the country's three recognized religious minorities. However, Mandaeans regard themselves not as Christians but as adherents of a religion that predates Christianity in both belief and practice. Mandaeans enjoyed official support as a distinct religion prior to the Revolution, but their legal status as a religion since then has been the subject of debate in the Majlis and has not been clarified. The small community faces discrimination similar to that faced by the country's other religious minorities. There were reports that members of the Mandaean community experienced societal discrimination and pressure to convert to Islam, and they often are denied access to higher education. Mandaean refugees have reported specific religious freedom violations and concerns, such as being forced to observe Islamic fasting rituals and to pray in Islamic fashion, both in direct violation of Mandaean teaching.

Sufi organizations outside the country remain concerned about government repression of Sufi religious practices, including the constant harassment and intimidation of prominent Sufi leaders by the intelligence and security services.

The Government propagates an interpretation of Islam that effectively deprives women of some rights granted to men. Gender segregation is enforced generally throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation and can be burdensome for those who do not follow strict Islamic religious codes; however, as a practical matter these prohibitions have loosened in recent years. Women must ride in a reserved section on public buses and enter public buildings, universities, and airports through separate entrances. Violators of these restrictions face punishments such as flogging or monetary fines. Women are prohibited from attending male sporting events, although this restriction does not appear to be enforced universally. Women are not free to choose what they wear in public, although enforcement of rules for conservative Islamic dress has eased in recent years. Women are subject to harassment by the authorities if their dress or behavior is considered inappropriate and are sentenced to flogging or imprisonment for such violations. Showing pictures of women in the media, including foreign women, who are not dressed in accordance with conservative Islamic dress norms, is prohibited by law. There are penalties, including flogging and monetary fines, for failure to observe norms of Islamic dress at work

Legally, the testimony of a woman is worth only half that of a man in court. A married woman must obtain the written consent of her husband before she may travel outside the country. The law provides for stoning for adultery; however, in 2002 the Government suspended this practice.

Although a male can marry at age 15 and above without parental consent, the 1991 Civil Law states that a virgin female, even over 18 years of age, needs the consent of her father or grandfather to wed, unless she is willing to go to court to get a ruling allowing her to marry without this consent.

Women have the right to divorce, and regulations promulgated in 1984 substantially broadened the grounds on which a woman may seek a divorce. However, a husband is not required to cite a reason for divorcing his wife. In 1986 the Government issued a 12-point "contract" to serve as a model for marriage and divorce, which limits the privileges accorded to men by custom and traditional interpretations of Islamic law. The model contract also recognized a divorced woman's right to a share in the property that couples acquire during their marriage and to increased alimony rights. Women who remarry are forced to give up custody of children from earlier marriages to the child's father. The law allows for the granting of custody of minor children to the mother in certain divorce cases in which the father is proven unfit to care for the child.

Many female Muslims are seeking to eliminate laws and practices that discriminate against women, arguing that relegating women to a lesser status due to, interalia, their being considered "deficient in reason" is not a precept of Islam, but rather a non-Islamic accretion to Islamic practices.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The property rights of Baha'is are generally disregarded, and they suffer frequent government harassment and persecution. Since 1979 the Government has confiscated large numbers of private and business properties belonging to Baha'is. Numerous Baha'i homes reportedly have been seized and handed over to an agency of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Sources indicate that property was confiscated in Rafsanjan, Kerman, Marv-Dasht, and Yazd. Several Baha'i farmers in the southern part of the country were arrested, and one who was jailed for several days was only freed after paying a fine. Authorities reportedly also confiscated Baha'i properties in Kata, forced several families to leave their homes and farmlands, imprisoned some farmers, and did not permit others to harvest their crops. In one instance, a Baha'i woman from Isfahan, who legally traveled abroad, returned to find that her home had been confiscated. The Government also has seized private homes in which Baha'i youth classes were held despite the owners having proper ownership documents. The Baha'i community claims the Government's seizure of Baha'i personal property and its denial of Baha'i access to education and employment are eroding the economic base of the community.

The Government harassed the Baha'i community by arbitrarily arresting Baha'is, charging them with violating Islamic penal code Articles 500 and 698, relating to activities against the State and spreading falsehood, respectively. Often, the charges were not dropped upon release and those with charges still pending against them reportedly feared rearrest at any time.

In February 2004, authorities initiated the destruction of the tomb of Quddus, a Baha'i holy site. Local Baha'is attempted to prevent the destruction through legal channels, but the tomb was destroyed in the interim. The Baha'is were not allowed permission to enter the site and retrieve the remains of this revered Baha'i figure. In June 2004, the house of Mizra Buzarg-e-Nuri, father of the faith's founder, was destroyed without notice. The house was confiscated before by the Government and was of great religious significance because the founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah, had lived there.

According to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, since 1979 more than 200 Baha'is have been killed, 15 have disappeared and are presumed dead, and more than 10,000 Baha'is have been dismissed from government and university jobs. The Government continued to imprison and detain Baha'is based on their religious beliefs.

In July 2004, a Baha'i optician in Hamadan was reportedly kidnapped and brutally attacked by five individuals, who threatened him with death if he did not recant his faith and convert to Islam. Local authorities were unwilling to pursue the case and a local judicial official told him "it would cost him dearly" if he chose to pursue his complaint against the assailants.

In November 2004, for the first time, the Baha'i community wrote an open letter to the government of the Islamic Republic, addressed to President Khatami, seeking an end to Baha'i-focused human rights and religious freedom abuses. Numerous anecdotal reports indicated a marked increase in government persecution of Baha'is after this letter. Much of this anti-Baha'i

activity focused on Yazd, presumably due to Yazdi Baha'is having presented Yazd intelligence-security officials with a copy of the letter.

In December 2004 and January 2005, nine Baha'is in Yazd were arrested and briefly detained, with their homes searched and some possessions confiscated. On January 14, authorities summoned, questioned, and released another Yazd Baha'i, and four days later on January 18, four individuals came to his home and beat him with batons, inflicting severe injuries to his face, back, and arms. The same individuals, equipped with batons and communication devices, also attacked the home of another Baha'i later that day. On that same day, these same persons went to the home of a third Baha'i and attacked him with batons, causing serious head wounds. This third Baha'i was attacked again on January 25; on January 27 his shop was set on fire.

On February 2 and 3, the Baha'i cemetery in Yazd was destroyed, with cars driven over the graves, tombstones smashed, and the remains of the interred left exposed. Two days later, a gravestone was removed and left in front of a Baha'i's home, along with a threatening letter. The Baha'i community filed a complaint with authorities at the national level, but no action was taken. These events coincided with the launch of a campaign of defamation against the Baha'i Faith in government-controlled media.

In February, two Baha'is were released from prison after serving almost 15 years on charges related to their religious beliefs.

In March, a series of Baha'i arrests and imprisonments began throughout the country. In Tehran on March 6, intelligence officials arrested and took into custody three prominent Baha'is, and another was arrested and imprisoned on March 16. Agents conducted prolonged searches of their homes and confiscated documents, books, and other belongings. They were all detained without charge, and released after having posted bail.

On March 8, one of the Baha'is previously arrested and briefly detained (for having distributed the open letter from the Baha'i community to President Khatami), received a three-year sentence and was incarcerated in Evin prison. Another Baha'i previously arrested and detained, was tried in absentia and given a one-year sentence for the same alleged offence. Neither of these men had access to lawyers nor to any form of legal counsel.

On April 25, five more Baha'is were arrested and imprisoned, all members of farming families whose properties had been confiscated in the village of Kata, when they obeyed a summons and came to the court for hearings concerning their grievances. On May 3, four more Baha'is from Kata answered a similar summons and appeared before a court in the same province. The judge asked them if they would relinquish their property, and the four Baha'is responded that they would not do so because the homes and land had belonged to their forefathers. The judge ordered their arrest and detention. Legal action was taken on their behalf, and on May 30, all nine farmers were released from prison after a business license had been used as collateral.

On May 16, eight Baha'is were summoned to appear before the office of the Public Prosecutor in the city of Semnan, and the next day another Baha'i in that city received a similar summons. They were charged with "creating anxiety in the minds of the public and those of the Iranian officials" and distributing "propaganda against the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran" for having distributed copies of the November 2004 open letter to various Iranian officials. When they arrived at the Prosecutor's office on May 18, they were asked to post bail for their release. Concerned that this could lead to further arrests and bail demands affecting other Baha'is, they declined to do so. They were detained and subsequently freed on May 20 2005, with the understanding that they would appear for a hearing at a later date.

In total, between March and Juneapproximately 35 Baha'is were arrested, charged, and released pending trial, with the charges typically being "causing anxiety in the minds of the public and of officials," and "spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran." By the end of the reporting period, Mehran Kawsari and Zabihullah Mahrami, the latter of whom was arrested in 1995 and convicted of apostasy in 1996 because of his adherence to the Baha'i Faith, were the only two Baha'is remaining in jail due to charges relating to their beliefs. Mahrami continued to serve his life sentence, which was commuted from a death sentence by President Khatami in 1999. There were also 36 Baha'is released on bail and awaiting trial.

The Government vigilantly enforces its prohibition on proselytizing activities by evangelical Christians by closing their churches and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations have been required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshippers are subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. The Government has restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials have been ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members to their congregations.

Conversion of a Muslim to a non-Muslim religion is considered apostasy under the law and is punishable by the death penalty, although it is unclear whether this punishment has been enforced in recent years. Similarly, non-Muslims may not proselytize Muslims without putting their own lives at risk. Evangelical church leaders are subject to pressure from authorities to sign pledges that they will not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services.

In previous years, the Government harassed churchgoers in Tehran, in particular worshippers of the capital's Assembly of God

congregation. This harassment has included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises, as well as demands for the presentation of the identity papers of worshippers inside. In May 2004, there were reports of the arrest of several dozen evangelical Christians in the north, including a Christian pastor, his wife, and their two teenage children in Chalous, in Mazandaran Province. Many of those arrested were released later in May, and the pastor and his family were released in July, after six weeks in detention. One press source reported that authorities ordered those jailed to stop meeting for worship and to "stop talking about Jesus."

On September 9 2004, security officials raided the annual general conference of the country's Assemblies of God Church, arresting approximately 85 religious leaders gathered at the church's denominational center in Karaj. After fingerprinting and questioning, authorities released all but 10 pastors later that day. Of these, nine were released on September 12. Assemblies of God Pastor Hamid Pourmand, a former Muslim of Assyrian Christian background who converted to Christianity nearly 25 years ago and who led a congregation in Bushehr, was the only detainee not released. In November 2004, Pourmand, who was also a non-commissioned officer in the Army, was moved to a military prison. In late January 2005 he was tried in a military court on charges of espionage. On February 16 he was found guilty of espionage and sentenced to 3 years, and was transferred to Evin Prison to serve his sentence. A military appeals court subsequently affirmed the verdict and the sentence. As a consequence, Pourmand faced automatic discharge from the army and forfeit of his entire income, pension, and housing for his family. In mid-April, Iranian authorities abandoned preliminary hearings against Pourmand before a Tehran General and Revolutionary Court on two separate charges of apostasy and proselytizing, both capital crimes, reportedly after news of his trial leaked out to the international press. In early May, he was transferred from Tehran to his home city of Bushehr to stand trial in a General and Revolutionary Court on these charges. On May 28, that court acquitted Pourmand on apostasy and proselytizing charges, and he was sent back to Tehran's Evin Prison to serve out the remainder ofhis 3-year prison sentence.

In 2000, 10 of 13 Jews arrested in 1999 were convicted on charges of illegal contact with Israel, conspiracy to form an illegal organization, and recruiting agents. Along with 2 Muslim defendants, the 10 Jews received prison sentences ranging from 4 to 13 years. An appeals court subsequently overturned the convictions for forming an illegal organization and recruiting agents, but it upheld the convictions for illegal contacts with Israel with reduced sentences. One of the 10 was released in February 2001 and another in January 2002, both upon completion of their prison terms. Three additional prisoners were released before the end of their sentences in October 2002. In April 2003, it was announced that the last five were to be released. It is not clear if the eight who were released before the completion of their sentences were fully pardoned or were released provisionally. During and shortly after the trial, Jewish-owned businesses in Tehran and Shiraz were targets of vandalism and boycotts, and Jews reportedly suffered personal harassment and intimidation. There were no reports of vandalism or similar harassment during the reporting period.

Numerous Sunni clerics have been killed in recent years, some allegedly by government agents. While the exact reason for their murders is unknown, most Sunni Muslims in the country belong to ethnic minorities who historically have suffered abuse by the central government.

There were no reports of government harassment of the Zoroastrian community during the reporting period; however, the community remains unable to convene a Spiritual Assembly to manage its religious affairs for fear of official retaliation, and there were reports of discrimination in employment and education. In June 2004, Zoroastrians were able to make, apparently without government interference, their annual pilgrimage to one of the holiest sites of their faith, the temple of Chak-Chak (near the city of Yazd).

The Government carefully monitors the statements and views of the country's senior Shi'a religious leaders. Several Shi'a religious leaders have been under house arrest for years, including Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who was released after 5 years of house arrest in January 2003.

The Special Clerical Court (SCC) system, established in 1987 to investigate offenses and crimes committed by clerics and which the Supreme Leader oversees directly, is not provided for in the Constitution and operates outside the domain of the judiciary. In particular, critics alleged that the clerical courts were used to prosecute certain clerics for expressing controversial ideas and for participating in activities outside the area of religion, including journalism.

On February 6, the special clerical court agreed to the conditional release (parole) of prominent dissident cleric Hojatoleslam Hassan Yussefi Eshkevari; he had served two thirds of his 7-year sentence and was therefore eligible for parole under the law. The cleric had been arrested in 2000, charged with the capital crimes of apostasy and "corruption on earth," in conjunction with speeches he had made in a 2000 conference on reform in Berlin.

Laws based on religion have been used to stifle freedom of expression. Independent newspapers and magazines have been closed, and leading publishers and journalists were imprisoned on vague charges of "insulting Islam" or "calling into question the Islamic foundation of the Republic." In 2002, academic Hashem Aghajari was sentenced to death for blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammed, based on a speech in which he challenged Muslims not to blindly follow the clergy, provoking an international and domestic outcry. In February 2003, his death sentence was revoked by the Supreme Court, but the case was sent back to the lower court for retrial. He was retried in July 2003 on charges that did not include apostasy and was sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment, 2 of which were suspended, and 5 years of additional "deprivation of social right" (meaning that he could not teach or write books or articles). His time served was counted towards his 3-year sentence; the court converted the remainder of the time to a fine.

Forced Religious Conversions

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

However, a child born to a Muslim father automatically is considered a Muslim. Also, Baha'is were repeatedly offered relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The continuous presence of the country's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, has accustomed the population to the participation of non-Muslims in society; however, government actions continued to create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

While Jews are a recognized religious minority, allegations of official discrimination are frequent. The Government's anti-Israel policies, along with a perception among radical Muslims that all Jewish citizens support Zionism and the state of Israel, create a hostile atmosphere for the small community. For example, during the reporting period, many newspapers celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the anti-Semitic publication "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Jewish leaders reportedly are reluctant to draw attention to official mistreatment of their community due to fear of government reprisal.

The Jewish community has been reduced to less than one-half of its prerevolutionary size. Some of this emigration is connected with the larger, general waves of departures following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, but some also stems from continued anti-Semitism on the part of the Government and within society.

In December 2004, the country's Sahar 1 TV station began airing a weekly series titled "For You, Palestine," or "Zahra's Blue Eyes," set in Israel and the West Bank. Produced in Farsi and subsequently translated into Arabic, this series depicted Israeli government, military, and civilian personnel harvesting organs from Palestinian children for the benefit of Israeli officials. Other anti-Semitic series shown on state-run Iranian television during this period included "The People of the Cave," a supposedly historical drama series, and "Al-Shatat." "Al-Shatat," originally broadcasted by Hizbullah's Al-Manar TV channel, portrayed the Jewish people as being responsible for most the world’s problems, via their conspiring to achieve political and economic domination over the world.

In April, Ayatollah Hossein Nouri-Hamedani, one of the country's leading religious authorities, told a group of clerics that "one should fight the Jews and vanquish them," to prepare the ground and to hasten the advent of the Hidden Imam.

On April 13, Representative Maurice Motamed, who represents Jews in the Majlis, complained that Iran's state television was broadcasting anti-Semitic programs. According to the press, Motamed claimed that "insulting Jews and attributing false things to them in television serials over the past 12 years has not only hurt the feelings of the Jewish community but has also led to the emigration of a considerable percentage of the Jewish community." Motamed also claimed that repeated complaints about this problem have not had the desired effect.

The Government's anti-Israel policies and the trial of 13 Jews in 2000, along with the perception among some of the country's radicalized elements that Jews support Zionism and the state of Israel, created a threatening atmosphere for the Jewish community (see Section II). Many Jews have sought to limit their contact with or support for the state of Israel out of fear of reprisal. Recent anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations have included the denunciation of Jews themselves as opposed to the past practice of denouncing only "Israel" and "Zionism," adding to the threatening atmosphere for the community.

Sunni Muslims encounter religious discrimination at the local, provincial, and national levels, and there were reports of discrimination against practitioners of the Sufi tradition during the reporting period. Sufis were also targeted by the country's intelligence and security services.

In June 2003, an interfaith delegation of American Christians, Jews, and Muslims traveled to meet with religious, political, and cultural leaders. In April 2005, an interfaith delegation of Muslims, Christians, and Jews paid a return visit to the United States, attending an interfaith conference in Washington, D.C.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The United States has no diplomatic relations with the country, and thus it cannot raise directly the restrictions that the

Government places on religious freedom and other abuses the Government commits against adherents of minority religions. The U.S. Government makes its position clear in public statements and reports, support for relevant U.N. and NGO efforts, and diplomatic initiatives to press for an end to government abuses.

From 1982 to 2001, the U.S. Government co-sponsored a resolution each year regarding the human rights situation in the country offered by the European Union at the annual meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). It passed every year until 2002, when the United States did not have a seat on the Commission, and the resolution failed passage by one vote. The U.S. supported a similar resolution offered each year during the U.N. General Assembly until the fall of 2002, when no resolution was tabled. The U.S. Government strongly supported the work of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Human Rights for Iran and called on the Government to grant him admission and allow him to conduct his research during the period of his mandate, which expired with the defeat of the resolution at the UNCHR in 2002. There also was no resolution on the country at the UNCHR in the spring of 2003. In 2003 the Canadian Government introduced a resolution censuring the country's human rights policies, which was passed by the U.N. General Assembly. The U.S. remains supportive of efforts to raise the human rights situation whenever appropriate within international organizations.

On numerous occasions, the U.S. State Department spokesman has addressed the situation of the Baha'i and Jewish communities in the country. The U.S. Government has encouraged other governments to make similar statements and has urged them to raise the issue of religious freedom in discussions with the Government.

Since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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International Religious Freedom Report Home Page